



Anna Mirek-Wodecki

Southern Men, American Persons

by Thomas Fleming

“Sweet home Alabama / Where the skies are so blue.” It has been many years since anyone made money from patriotic songs dedicated to Illinois or New Jersey. Chicago and New York have their anthems of course, to say nothing of San Francisco, but no one is going to get into a fight over “the city that never sleeps” or “little cable cars climbing halfway to the stars.” In the 19th century, we did celebrate the rivers of the midsection: the Ohio and the Wabash, but none of them was so famous as the inconsequential Suwannee celebrated by Stephen Foster and later taken up by New York songwriters as a codeword for the sentimentalized South: “How I love ya, how I love ya, my dear old Swanee.”

We are become a cynical and heartless people, more prone to deride than to celebrate our hometowns, and yet Charlie Daniels virtually drips with sentiment as he sings of “Carolina,” and Merle Haggard was proud to be an Okie from Muskogee, which he was not. If northern songwriters can occasionally write movingly of the troubles of Allentown, Pennsylvania, the tone of boosterism and defiance is almost exclusively confined to the South. “If the South had won the war, we’d a had it made,” Hank Williams Jr. was singing a few years ago, just when the critics were praising him for giving up his Southern nationalism.

Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama” remains the benchmark Southern song, because it is deliberately combative, throwing down the gauntlet to the Canadian leftist who had stuck his nose into what did not concern him. In “Southern Man,” Neil Young had cried shame on Southerners for the usual reasons. One might have thought that an Anglo-Canadian could have better spent his time on the Ojibwa, victims of both toxic waste and toxic welfare, or the French, whose identity the English did their best to eliminate. “Mr. Young, does your conscience bother you?”

One does not need to turn to popular music to find signs of Southern chauvinism. Southern fiction has so dominated the United States in this century that some people have said there

are only two kinds of American writers, Southerners and Jews. This is an exaggeration, but just barely, and despite the considerable differences that separate Southerners and Jews, the success of both groups depends on their atavisms: loyalty to kinfolk, preservation of tradition, and suspicion of aliens.

In America Faulkner could only have been a Southerner, because only a Southerner can spend his life wrestling with what it means to be a Southerner. A century and a half ago, when Nathaniel Hawthorne was crafting his nearly perfect stories of Puritan life, the Northeastern writer was already out of touch with his people, and as a thin stream of civilization flowed westward in the wake of the pioneers, region after region went through a brief period of literary exaltation—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, the Plains States—before the stream lost itself in the deserts of the West. The closest approximation to a northern Faulkner may be Glenway Wescott, of an old Yankee family in Wisconsin. But Wescott left Wisconsin at an early age, and the narrator of *The Grandmothers*—an almost too beautiful novel tracing his own family’s descent—is an expatriate, like Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

Not all Southern writers have been obsessed with the land and its history—Walker Percy and George Garrett are notable exceptions—but, as the essays in this number illustrate, the land and its people was the dominant theme of the Agrarians as well as of Faulkner, and it is still providing Fred Chappell and Wendell Berry with the matter of literature. There is nothing unusual in this; what is unusual is what has happened to the rest of the American Empire, where people of my generation can scarcely tell a single tale of their grandparents and where it is nothing for families to spread themselves across the continent like so many toys shaken on a child’s blanket.

No human civilization has ever been created by nomads—although even true nomads have their sense of place—and whether one looks at Athens in the fifth century or Florence in the 14th or Edinburgh in the 18th, the great works that define our culture as “the West” were created by men who knew

who their people were and knew the land they lived on. Here in the Middle West, only the Indians have a right to speak of their ancestors or call the land sacred, and when they complain of the desecration of funeral mounds, they are defended only by crackpot leftists who have forgotten to turn down the thermostat in their sweatlodge. Self-described conservatives—what a word that is becoming—make fun of people who do not like to see the bones of their ancestors put on display in Barnum's museum.

A people such as we have become in the United States is incapable of creating or even receiving the gifts of civilization. Because human beings are, as a species, almost infinitely creative, there are individuals sporadically writing books or composing music that is worth some attention, but there is nothing specifically American unless it be that self-abusive consumerism that has overstocked California with two-legged parasites and keeps the national economy grinding on to the doomsday we are preparing for ourselves. Eating and spending, we lay waste our powers. If in the next century there is a civilization in North America, it will have been the creation of Mexicans or French Canadians or Indians or even, if they survive, Southerners.

One of the chief effects of the South's survival would be the challenge it would represent to other sections. An arrogant and overbearing Southern culture could antagonize Yankees or Midwesterners to rediscover their own identity. In the greatest political novel of the century, Chesterton's *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, one of the dreariest of London's neighborhoods takes over the city, thereby inciting the other neighborhoods to assert their independence. The rest of the country seems to need the South, if only as a whipping boy. What will we do when it is gone?

Much of the South is no doubt gone, and I have never been persuaded by John Reed's Pollyanisms about Southern distinctiveness surviving in the suburbs. So much talk about Southern identity and Southern culture cannot be a good thing: members of authentic cultures do not have to wear T-shirts or attend conferences to prove who they are. All the various Southern culture projects are a Disneyland surrogate for the real thing, and the professional Southerner today is as authentic as a stage Irishman or a Stepford wife. They love the South, because, now that they have got over the race thing, Southerners are actually more tolerant, more humane, more—well—northern than northerners. I cannot print my response to this nonsense in a family magazine. It is better for blacks and whites to hate each other, if the fruits of toleration are lies and cowardice, just as I would welcome the return of the persecuting spirit to Christianity, if it meant the faith was strong enough to justify torture and death.

The real South was and is a dangerous place, more like Mexico than Chapel Hill, and if you say the wrong thing or look the wrong way at the wrong time, there will be some cracker to make an issue out of it. And not just crackers. Southern men of good family may no longer fight duels, but they might just be willing to slap you silly or take revenge in less obvious ways. Ted Turner is reckoned to be one of the nastiest businessmen in America, and I sometimes wonder if he would be less ruthless, if he had been able to call out his rivals.

Everywhere I go, I meet real Southerners who are not about to apologize for either their family or their flag. The other night I received a telephone call from a perfect stranger who wanted some historical ammunition. At a local high school

named for General Lee, some students had been displaying the Confederate flag until the superintendent issued a decree prohibiting it, and my caller—an articulate but not educated Southerner—wanted to defend the students. When all is said and done, there is only one argument that counts in these flag controversies, and that is loyalty. One can argue all day about the comparative sins of Southern slaveowners and Yankee capitalists, but for real men and women, all that matters is the love they bear their people and their land. If Southerners are going to be asked to repudiate their flag and their history, do not imagine it will make them good Americans. The most that can be hoped for is that they will turn into one more whining minority.

The war against the South did not end in 1865 or even 1876, when the last federal troops were pulled out of Southern states. After some years of peace, the war was renewed in the 50's and 60's, and under our rednecked Rhodes Scholar President it has heated up again. Consider the Byron De La Beckwith trial. I had always assumed, without having any particular knowledge, that "Delay" was guilty, and if I had served on his first jury, I would have voted guilty. But the jurors felt differently, and I think I understand why. Mississippi was under invasion, by federal marshals, northern leftists, and a civil rights movement that was every day proclaiming race war against Southern whites. If forced to choose between their people and its enemies, most decent, simple people will choose their own. We cannot ask ordinary people to get above their raising, and if we do, we are really demanding that they hate themselves.

In any event, Beckwith was tried twice, and one had thought that particular phase of the war was over. But no, this pathetic and cracked old man, who under other circumstances could have plead mental incompetence, was forced to go through it all again. I cannot blame the family of Medgar Evers for wanting vengeance. In their place, I might have done it myself. But a show trial of this kind implicates the entire nation in a sensitivity witchhunt that will be a source of embarrassment to our posterity, if there is a posterity that can read books and make up its own mind.

I am not in favor of any of these historic trials. There is something coldhearted and nasty about the pursuit of supposed ex-Nazis, like John Demjanjuk, who after years of peaceful and harmless existence are dragged forth as scapegoats for the sins of our own insensitive society. I felt the same way about the middle-aged member of the Weather Underground—a successful businesswoman, a wife and mother—what purpose does it serve to put her in jail? Campuses in the 60's were the scene of civil war, and although I have no compunction about blaming the left for what it did in those days, the war is over, and it is time for amnesty—for the students and for the cops and for the National Guardsmen at Kent State and even for Richard Nixon and Mayor Daley.

For two decades after the War Between the States, the Kansas-Missouri border war was kept alive by a number of young men who had fought under the black flag with Quantrill and Anderson. The Youngers were caught in Northfield, Minnesota, and Jesse James was murdered by an assassin hired by the governor of Missouri. When Frank James finally turned himself in to be tried, no one thought Frank was exactly innocent of all charges, but his acquittal meant that after three decades of fighting, the war was over. Unfortunately, the war

against the South is not over, and the South's enemies—the liberal-conservative Establishment that owns and operates the United States as a private monopoly—will not rest until they have erased every vestige of the Southern identity.

One typical complaint against the Confederate flag is that it is the symbol of treason and rebellion. I say "typical," because no one who knew anything of our history would be so obtuse. The withdrawal of a commonwealth from a federation does not constitute rebellion, much less treason, either in political theory or in international law. There are those who will say that the states of the Union did not have a right to secede. They are wrong, but let us concede the point. The Virginians and Carolinians of the 1860's certainly had better right to secede than their fathers and grandfathers who liberated their states from British rule, and yet we are not ashamed of Washington and Adams, and we do not curse the memory of these traitors to the only lawfully constituted authority that had been conceivable from the time John Smith set foot in Virginia. The government of Andrew Johnson had wanted to try Jefferson Davis for treason, but the President thought better of it when he realized that world opinion would be solidly against him.

So far from being traitors to the American Republic, Southerners have been, at least since the Spanish-American War, the greatest chauvinists, sensitive to any blot on the national honor, eager for war, and proud of the Stars and Stripes. It is a pernicious piece of nonsense to claim that a man cannot be loyal to his state or region without being disloyal to his nation.

The Modern Boswell

by Thomas Fleming

For Mel and Marie

This is what you've waited for all your life,
storing up every stupid thing he said.
You spent these thirty years sharpening the knife
you stuck into his back once he was dead.

What was it you were thinking all those years
you played the colleague, confidant, and friend?
He blurbed your books, true, put up with your sneers
at his success. *You* got him in the end,

Why? Was it that he was just too damn good?
Others you might have hoped to emulate,
by doing even half the work you could.
Being himself he made you second-rate.

We hate whom we have harmed, says Tacitus,
so you elucidate his path to hell,
a friendless and unransomed Theseus
who stumbled on his love for you and fell.

That is like saying a man cannot be a good father or a good Baptist, unless he is just a little bit of a traitor to the state that demands perfect and total loyalty.

I often think of our late friend, M.E. Bradford. The only time I think we seriously disagreed was during the Gulf War. He understood and accepted all the criticisms I made against the injustice and imprudence of that crusade for democracy, and yet, at the end of a discussion, he would always come back to the same point: it would do Americans good to punish the strutting little despot who had insulted our country.

I do not think I ever met a more patriotic American: he had served his country in the Navy, had devoted much of his valuable time to political battles both in Texas and in Washington, and had spent much of his later years explaining the meaning of the Constitution to a nation that had turned its back on the rule of law. As a leader of the conservative coalition, he had been an excellent fighter on behalf of principle. His only weakness was that he was a very poor hater. He could get temporarily incensed against those who lied against him—Irvings Kristol and George Will—but he could not bring himself to seek revenge and would not countenance it in his friends. As Paul Gottfried always used to say, Mel was too much of a Christian to make a good politician.

To his academic colleagues, even those who considered themselves his friends, Mel often seemed an anomaly. Here was a literary historian who could have carved out a very comfortable career, if only he had stuck to his trade and avoided controversy. When Clyde Wilson's volume of essays *Why the South Will Survive* was published in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of *I'll Take My Stand*, the reviewer in the *Virginia Quarterly* took all the contributors to task for politicizing the Agrarian inheritance. The shaft was aimed at Mel, of course, to make it appear that he had diverted a literary movement into politics.

But the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* were nothing if not political, and several of them wanted to call the volume *Tracts Against Communism*. Indeed, it is hard to think of a man of letters more political than Donald Davidson. Even if he had tried, Mel Bradford could not have disentangled politics from literature, not in the trivial sense that he could not recognize literary merit in liberal writers, but because the career of the writer and scholar was bound up with the community that had given him life and cultural sustenance. His role was not to go off into the wilderness in order to discover some unheard of system of thought and expression to spark a revolution. On the contrary. Speaking of the resemblance of Southern writers to ancient Romans, he wrote: "[B]oth reflect the all-absorbing corporate spirit of the culture for which they speak. The Southern writer, like his ancient counterpart, has almost always felt the pressure to be a public man and to perform a service in relation to that powerful sense of cultural identity."

For me, Mel was a kind of touchstone of integrity. Whatever decency a man had was sure to be called forth and encouraged by the mere fact of knowing Mel, and if there were those who responded to his open nature with distrust and chicane, they revealed themselves for what they were. In offering this number of *Chronicles* to M.E. Bradford, we are paying tribute to a man who represented the last link in many chains: a man of letters who put his pen to his nation's use, a passionate Southerner and loyal American, a faithful friend, and a Christian husband and father who did his duty.